

Un-Discipline Yourself: Reflections on Ideas for a Disordered World - Francis J. Gavin

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Editor's Note: This is adapted from remarks by the author at the recent Carnegie International Policy Scholars conference in Minnowbrook, New York.

Mr. Haydock's Note: I have edited this to reduce the length and to make it less context specific. My additions are in brackets.

. . . American society has, I believe, witnessed a decline in engaged, deeper historical and comparative intellectual debate that reaches out beyond the narrow confines of the ivory tower and engages a larger public. The obsession on the immediate often obscures the [importance of powerful and deep socio-cultural, technological, demographic, normative, and ideological forces that shape the world we live in](#) — forces that are often only loosely connected to deliberations in Washington and other capitals, if they are connected at all.

What can the young scholar do? One way your intellectual capital can be deployed in unique and important ways is to help analyze and explain these forces, and put them in a broader historical context. This is especially important the explosion of data is overwhelming. Vartan Gregorian, the president of the Carnegie Corporation of New York, spoke to this in a lovely recent speech, "[Against Fragmentation: The Case for Intellectual Wandering](#)":

Especially today, in the age of information, when we are bombarded from all sides, every minute, every hour of the day and night, it can seem that we are living in the least analytical, the least insightful of times. How to transform raw information into useful, structured knowledge remains a great challenge.

Unfortunately, it is hard to argue that universities [and high schools] — the institutions best situated to help assess and aid our understanding of the complex trends shaping our world — are doing all they might to engage and frame these issues for the larger public. In particular, young scholars are rarely encouraged or provided the tools in their training to engage these larger questions or engage these broader audiences in meaningful ways. Perhaps more importantly, how you are trained and how you are socialized often actively discourages this instinct.

Please allow me a personal reflection to illustrate my point:

When I started college, international politics was still defined by the Cold War, which showed few signs of ending. Within a year of graduating, it had disappeared, and within three years, the Soviet Union itself was gone. The world turned upside down and transformed. I realized almost nothing I had learned from my international relations training was remotely useful in understanding — to say nothing of explaining — the momentous events that were occurring. This led me to have a much different view of the purpose of education, learning, knowledge, and ideas. I spent the next few years trying to figure out how best to understand, engage, and participate in the debates and explorations of these incredibly important issues brought by the end of the Cold War.

Mine was a nutty personal story, involving cross-country travel, fun, poverty, and several scrapes with the law, but more than anything, it involved reading. And by reading, I mean everything I could get my hands on, including history, policy, memoirs, novels, poetry, philosophy, cultural criticism, art, economics, anthropology, and beyond — anything and everything that might help me make sense of a rapidly changing world.

I recall one particular evening in the late summer of 1990, riding a bus in Philadelphia, home from some dreadful temp job I had, reading the latest issue of the *New York Review of Books*, which along with *Granta* and the *Times Literary Supplement*, I used to devour. It was right after Iraq had invaded Kuwait, and the world was waiting to see what would happen.

Within one issue, there was a world of extraordinary knowledge: [Edward Mortimer](#) reviewing the book *Republic of Fear*, which truly opened our eyes to the horrors of Saddam Hussein; a speech by [Vaclav Havel](#), lamenting the absurdity of an obscure playwright finding himself the president of his nation; an original essay penned by the great political philosopher, Isaiah Berlin, connecting an obscure 18th century French intellectual, [Joseph de Maistre](#), to the origins of fascism; and a reminder from [Fang Lizhi](#), a renowned Chinese physicist and dissident, of the Chinese Communist Party's practice of erasing any trace of controversy or dissent from official memory. There was the great historian, Gordon Wood, on the American revolution, and a long essay laying out the biography of the [recently released Nelson Mandela](#) and what to expect from the African National Congress and South Africa's future.

This issue also offered a [review of the controversial](#) father of sociobiology, E.O. Wilson, and his masterwork on the lives of ants, as well as a [Pete Peterson](#) jeremiad on U.S. debt, and a [penetrating analysis of portrayals of African-Americans](#) in 18th and 19th century paintings. There was also Timothy Garton Ash's [first-hand account of the Chequers Affair](#).

The article from this issue that stayed with me the most over the years, however, was not a policy article, but rather a bittersweet piece on the [biography of A.A. Milne, the author of Winnie the Pooh](#). I was never able to think about Pooh, Eeyore, Piglet, and especially Christopher Robin in the same way again.

Why do I bring this up?

It was this kind of broad, wide-ranging intellectual engagement that drove me to graduate school. I didn't get a PhD in history to become a historian or security studies scholar as much as I saw it as a hunting license to be part of this great world of big ideas, important debates, and extraordinary style. Alas, I haven't reached that standard, though I will keep trying. But I always remember that is the kind of big thoughts and ideas and debates I saw there and witnessed in the late 1980s and early 1990s was why I . . . [went to graduate school].

How does this relate to today's young scholars? I think one of our obligations — and frankly, great opportunities — as scholars is to try to contribute to a larger public debate, driven by big ideas.

Yet there is a tension, a contradiction. Much of what is happening to all of you in your PhD programs both facilitates and inhibits this goal. . . . Many PhD programs are increasingly oriented less towards producing novel ideas than inculcating young people — disciplining them — into the ways and practices of a guild (your particular discipline).

On the positive side, there is much value in this rigorous training. You are taught valuable research skills and are trained in powerful methods. You learn how to think deeply about causality, and marrying logic to evidence. You become familiar and conversant with a literature and at least pay deference to the idea of cumulated knowledge. You also join a community: Creating knowledge is a social activity, and this matters. You become involved in a larger enterprise, marked by its own traditions and norms, linked over generations. You obtain a credential and a professional identity which carries recognition and prestige.

There are other, more problematic aspects of being in a system whose primary focus is to encourage you to master a discipline. Your training focuses almost exclusively on what happens within that discipline — its norms, its practices, its own measures of accomplishment, at the expense of other worthwhile goals, like engaging different intellectual traditions or a wider world. Unless you are careful, this leads to jargon, obsession with method, strange over-reverence for key texts and authors, and limits where the imagination can roam.

Nor are you encouraged to ask whether or not this discipline and its rules are properly oriented to larger, more important goals, like generating ideas that make the world a better place or engaging people outside of your sub-group. Instead, you are encouraged to “own” a piece of the discipline, which incentivizes young scholars to focus on smaller and smaller questions — ones where they can become the dominant voice, that she or he can master and speak upon with great certainty. These forces and incentives can lead to careerism, the great enemy of intellectual life.

You also see those who have made it . . . and notice that one of the keys to their success is to project an air of authority. You come to realize that there is little incentive to generate a hypothesis and have your research prove you wrong. It's even worse to generate results that are uncertain or inconclusive, despite the fact this is the honest and normal outcome of most intellectual inquiry. Humility and empathy are rarely rewarded.

As time has gone on, I've wondered if the extraordinary benefits of disciplines, especially in the social sciences, don't outweigh their liabilities. They have become rigid and unchanging, built on assumptions and models that may have made sense in the late 19th century but bear little relation to the world we find ourselves in. The natural sciences and engineering do much better on this front than the social sciences, generating new ways of organizing knowledge while discarding others according to the problems the world presents to them. Those of us who care about international relations could learn valuable lessons from how they operate.

. . .
I think we can all agree that an undertaking where the prevailing advice to young people is, “Wait until you achieve tenure [graduate high school, become established in a career] to research and write about what you are passionate about, in the way you (and not your discipline) thinks is best and which the larger world cares about,” is far from ideal. Ten, 15, 20 years — the time it takes to get a PhD and achieve tenure — is far too long to wait to unleash creativity, accessibility, and publicly minded thinking. Our goal is to produce creative thinkers and scholars, not partners at McKinsey or a white-shoe law firm, and our procedures to assess talent and ideas should better reflect the difference.

When I ponder what the ideal attitude a young scholar should take towards ideas, I imagine some mix of untamed curiosity, passion, risk, adventure, humility, and generosity, tamed with healthy doses of skepticism and a love for vigorous debate, and even an occasional willingness to brawl.
And a willingness to roam far and wide to learn from and engage with smart ideas and people, regardless of how or where or in what they were trained. . . .

But when you think about it — does your discipline, your graduate training, your daily life as junior faculty [or, in our case, and IB student or an IB subject teacher], fully encourage these traits, these leanings, these ways of seeing the world? In fact, odds are you entered graduate school [school, the teaching profession] with many of these qualities, and have had to fight like crazy to maintain them.

. . . Your goal should be to find a way to balance between your deep training and knowledge and this willingness to reach out, to take risks. Perhaps . . . it will involve something harder, something more difficult, [summed up eloquently by Gregorian](#):

The challenge calls for integrating and resynthesizing the compartmentalized knowledge of disparate fields: the ability to make connections among seemingly different disciplines, discoveries, events, and trends and to integrate them in ways that benefit the commonwealth of learning.

The world beyond your discipline — the commonwealth of learning — has both promise and dangers. The world, however, needs you, especially in these confusing, disordered times. To be blunt, the world does not need more political scientists, or even historians [or molecular biologists or electrical engineers]. It needs thinkers and teachers. It needs what Gregorian calls intellectual wanderers.

We've all been given a great gift — to live in a world of ideas, to read, write, think, and teach, and I think we owe it to the world to find ways to pay back for those opportunities in a way that generates a better understanding of the complex times we live in, or, falling short of that, just a better conversation.

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